New Work for a Critical Metaphysics of Race

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Abstract: Analytic metaphysics has become increasingly extended into the social domain. The aim of this article is critical self-reflection on the challenges of transferring the tools of analytic metaphysics from classical cases such as the very existence of abstract or composed objects to socially-contested phenomena such as gender and race. In reflecting on the status of metaphysics of race, I formulate a polemical hypothesis of misalignment according to which the tools of analytic metaphysics are not suitable for engaging with complex racial phenomena and politics. In addressing this challenge of misalignment, the article sketches a perspective on critical metaphysics of race as interdisciplinary action research.

**1. Introduction**

Academic discourses about race have been quickly growing in a wide range of disciplines from biomedical sciences to history of science, from social psychology to education, from decolonial to policy studies. Philosophy is no exception to the increasing academic concern with both theorizing race and coming to terms with racialized legacies of academia. While there are rich histories of philosophical reflection about race and racism (e.g. Firmin, 1885; Du Bois, 1897; Cooper, 1892; Fanon, 1952), much of this work remained at the periphery of the institutionalized mainstream of both analytic and continental philosophy. Times are changing. Rather than being marginalized as niche topics at the institutional periphery, questions about race and racism have become increasingly normalized as research topics at the core of academic philosophy from major conferences to journals to university presses to university seminars.

This article focuses on the burgeoning debate about the metaphysics of race in academic philosophy (Glasgow et al., 2019) to address a tension between its potential relevance and its rather isolated character in both academic and public debate. On the one hand, metaphysical debates about race seem to address foundational issues that are of utmost relevance for scholars as well as broader publics: do races exist at all? If races exist, what kind of (e.g. biological, cultural, and/or political) entities are they? (When) Is it legitimate to talk about races in scientific research and/or public discourse? What are the political implications of endorsing or rejecting racial categories? Metaphysics of race therefore seems to be a crucial conversation partner for interdisciplinary dialogue, social activism, and policy by providing resources for reflecting on contested categories and ontological assumptions in both science and the public sphere.

On the other hand, current debates in the metaphysics of race remain relatively isolated from wider empirical research as well as public negotiations of race. The lack of interdisciplinary reception is clearly reflected in academic debate patterns. From journals such as *Nature Genetics* and the *The New England Journal of Medicine* to the *Du Bois R*e*view* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* metaphysical debates about the nature of race from academic philosophy play at best a supporting role in the negotiation of racial categories in both natural and social sciences. The influence of metaphysics of race in the public sphere seems even more negligible. As I am working on the draft of this article, Donald Trump promised on Twitter a crackdown on teaching “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) in federal agencies after a segment of Fox News characterized CRT as "an existential threat to the United States". As the President of the United States encouraged to “report any sightings [of CRT] so we can quickly extinguish” through Twitter, analytic metaphysics of race is largely absent from the intersection of academic and public negotiations of race. On a wider public scale, it is barely recognized as a source for scholar activism and rarely disrupts the racial status quo in ways that would motivate public controversy.

How did metaphysics of race develop such an internally dynamic and complex debate while remaining externally largely invisible and isolated? Rather than blaming empirical researchers and public actors for insufficient engagement with metaphysical insights, this article aims at critical self-reflection about the tools of analytic metaphysics and their suitability for intervening in both empirical and public controversies surrounding race. More specifically, the article develops a thesis of “systemic misalignment” according to which tools from analytic metaphysics are maladapted for addressing the contextual and political complexity of racial phenomena. Some metaphysicians may simply accept this consequence: analytic metaphysics often does not aim to make contributions to empirical research or even public policy. Debates about natural kinds such as gold or water do not aim to advance current research in chemistry. Debates about the very existence of tables do not aim to advance interior design. Debates about the ontological status of social institutions typically do not aim to advance public policy.

In analogy, one may hold that metaphysical debates about the nature of race unfold on a different level of abstraction that should not be burdened with demands of empirical or political relevance. If race is simply treated as another intriguing philosophical puzzle for metaphysical contemplation, the concerns of this article may seem misplaced. However, many metaphysicians clearly have the ambition of making their arguments relevant beyond a narrow circle of peers and of connecting metaphysics to wider concerns about social justice (Griffith, 2019). While the following sections are largely focused on developing a critical diagnosis of “systemic misalignment”, the article ends with a constructive sketch of a critical metaphysics of race as interdisciplinary action research that is shaped by demands of both empirical and societal relevance.

**Analytic Metaphysics and the Social Domain - The Problem of Misalignment**

Analytic metaphysics is undergoing a substantial expansion and transformation of research agendas. The revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy since the 1960s (Rosen, 2015; Simons, 2004) paid little attention to the nature of the social domain and instead focused on more abstract issues such as composition, necessity, and universals. Following influential articles such as Appiah (1985) and Haslanger (1995), the field has more recently become a vibrant meeting ground for debates about contested entities in the social domain such as race but also caste, class, disability, ethnicity, gender, intelligence, mental disorder, mother, refugee, sexual orientation, and so on (e.g. Ásta, 2018; Haslanger, 2012; Mallon, 2016; Witt, 2010). This incorporation of the social domain into analytic metaphysics suggests an optimistic diagnosis about the increased public relevance and sensitivity of academic philosophy. While analytic philosophers of the second half of the 20th century fine-tuned concepts and methods with esoteric entities such as grue (Goodman, 1954), gavagai (Quine, 1960), twin water (Putnam, 1973), or swamp men (Davidson, 1987), a new generation of metaphysicians is reaping the applied benefits of this theoretical labor by addressing its implications in contested social realities.

However, this optimism is not universally shared and analytic metaphysicians commonly encounter distrust or even hostility from academic communities who have been engaging with social realities through different intellectual traditions. In the case of race, Taylor’s *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (2013) starts with the observation that analytic debates following Appiah (1985) have made the topic “safe for professional philosophy” but also acknowledges scepticism about a process that “opened its doors to people with interests in the traditional ‘core’ subfields of analytic philosophy - language, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind - and to people whose political commitments scarcely went beyond the generic anti-racism that now sets the boundaries of most polite conversation. This mainstreaming of philosophical race theory strikes some who work in the field as politically and philosophically dangerous” (2013, x). Insofar as analytic philosophy treats race as just another intellectually intriguing and metaphysically puzzling entity, worries are often explicitly political and Curry (2009, 1) argues that the mainstreaming of philosophical engagement with race has led to an “outright denial” of the “revolutionary fervor contained in the intellectual history specific to the Critical Race Theory”.

One may be tempted to dismiss distrust and hostility towards current metaphysics of race as a reflection of institutional divisions in academic philosophy that lead to partisan policing of the boundaries between intellectual traditions. As analytic metaphysicians expand their focus into the social domain, they are engaging with topics that have been discussed in other philosophical communities who have often developed academic identities independently or even in direct opposition to the mainstream of analytic philosophy. While there is certainly some truth in this response, the aim of this article is to argue that it fails to acknowledge a deeper methodological challenge of misalignment that arises when transferring tools from analytic metaphysics into the social domain.

Of course, there is no fixed set of tools that all analytic metaphysicians embrace but this is true for most other academic fields as there is also no fixed set of concepts, models, and methods that are employed by all cultural anthropologists or quantum physicists. At the same time, it is also not too difficult to identify intellectual tools that are widely employed in analytic metaphysics and can be related to the works of classical authors in the field like Davidson, Goodman, Millikan, Lewis, Kripke, or Quine. A scholar who explores a gender- or race-related issue through semantic externalism, possible worlds, universals, natural kinds, etc. is probably an analytically trained metaphysician. A person who explores the same issue through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, free listing, and thick description is probably a cultural anthropologist. It does not take necessary and sufficient conditions to recognize that scholars from different fields often approach the same domain with clearly distinct intellectual toolboxes.

Just as there is a recognizable family of intellectual tools in analytic metaphysics, there is also a family of phenomena to which these tools have been traditionally applied. For example, classical debates in analytic metaphysics tend to focus on entities of the natural sciences like elementary particles, gold, or species. Furthermore, analytic metaphysics tends to focus on the nature of entities in most general terms such as the very existence of abstract or composed objects while specific entities such as the “the number 42” or “the table in front of me” typically serve as illustrations without attracting metaphysical interest in their own right. Granted, the traditional domain of analytic metaphysics has fuzzy boundaries but it is reasonably easy to identify paradigm cases both inside (e.g. elementary particles and abstract objects) and outside (e.g. races or racialized populations) of its boundaries.

Furthermore, it is not difficult to provide some preliminary motivation for the hypothesis that these different intellectual traditions can lead to a misalignment between the tools of analytic metaphysics and the demands of critical engagement with social realities and with race in particular. The domain of inquiry that shaped concepts, models, and methods of analytic metaphysics behaves in many ways very differently from the domain of contentious social kinds that include racialized groups. For example, social kinds involve countless “looping effects” (Hacking, 1995) and a dense network of social causes that require substantial engagement with empirical insights from fields like anthropology, economics, and sociology. They typically involve blurred borders that are historically and geographically unstable and lack core properties along classical examples of natural kinds such as gold and water. Furthermore, their politically contentious character implies that social kinds are often surrounded by complex public controversies that make “boundary work” on their nature itself a contested public activity.

To sum up, skepticism towards the expansion of analytic metaphysics into the social domain can be constructed as a hypothesis of misalignment. Analytic metaphysics has developed tools that are adapted for the discussion of entities that are very far detached from messy realities of the social domain. Using these tools in debates about race does not necessarily promise substantial insights about the nature of racial phenomena that are relevant for interdisciplinary research or even political practice. The following sections develop this hypothesis by arguing that problem accumulation provides strong evidence for misalignment: The transfer of metaphysical tools into debates about race creates a plethora of misunderstandings and misrepresentations that cannot be easily fixed through small adaptations.

**3. Reformed Metaphysics of Race**

The expansion of analytic metaphysics into the social domain has not only received external critique but has also led to internal methodological reflection on meta-metaphysical challenges (Barnes, 2014; Diaz-Leon, 2020; Hochman, 2017; McKitrick, 2018; Mikkola, 2015; Sider, 2016). This section introduces two challenges that have emerged from this internal debate and a strategy of metaphysical reform that responds to them through refinement of metaphysical tools.

*Challenge 1: Fundamentality marginalizes social kinds*

One persistent issue of metaphysics is the formulation of its domain of inquiry. Sure, metaphysics is concerned with the nature and structure of reality but all scientific inquiry is concerned with the nature and structure of reality in some way. A common strategy of demarcation has been to make metaphysics about the fundamental structure of reality. For example, Lowe (2011,108) argues that “metaphysics, properly conceived, is the study of the most fundamental structure of reality” and Sider (2011) has suggested that “metaphysics, at bottom, is about the fundamental nature of reality”. As Barnes (2014, 13) has argued, appeals to fundamentality risk to exclude the very possibility of social metaphysics: “When we are making claims about genders, races, social types, and social structures, [...] we’re not trying to limn the fundamental structure of the universe.” In the worst case, then, traditional framings of metaphysics exclude debates about the nature of race from counting as proper metaphysics at all. Of course, there are different ways of specifying fundamentality and some accounts of fundamentality (e.g. in terms of naturalness or generality) can leave room for some social metaphysics (e.g. social kinds can be natural and general to some degree). However, such accounts still risk to push debates about social kinds to the periphery of the field that remains distant from the genuinely natural entities (e.g. elementary particles) and the genuinely general questions (e.g. whether composed objects exist at all). Appeals to fundamentality therefore risk to reproduce hierarchies between a theoretical core and an applied periphery that have dominated many areas of analytic philosophy. Rather than trying to negotiate some space for discussion of socially fundamental entities such as class, gender, or race, one may therefore conclude that critical theory of the social domain is better off by working in alternative intellectual traditions.

*Challenge 2:* *Substantivity marginalizes normative concerns*

The boundaries of race directly affect social life from daily encounters with racialized practices to policies such as affirmative action. However, traditional metaphysical frameworks run the risk of marginalizing the normative dimensions of this boundary work. For example, consider Sider’s (2011) distinction between substantive and non-substantive questions. As Sider explains, questions such as “Is Robin Crusoe a bachelor? Is a water glass a cup?” should not count as substantive because answers simply depend on how we choose to use the concepts *bachelor* or *cup.* There is not a privileged meaning of *bachelor* or *cup* that carves nature at the joints and the issue depends on the pragmatics of linguistic negotiation. In contrast, “Is the Eiffel Tower made of iron?” has a substantive answer because it is objectively true that the Eiffel Tower is made of iron. Sure, we could define “iron” in a different way so that it includes all instances of the chemical element Fe except the ones that compose the Eiffel Tower. But such a gerrymandered definition would misrepresent the chemical structure of the world by failing to carve nature at the joints.

Metaphysical distinctions between substantive and non-substantive questions can lead to a dilemma of rejecting either normative concerns or metaphysical depth in debates about the nature of race. Sider (2016) has suggested that his framework of substantivity can be exported into debates about social kinds by asking whether concepts carve the causal-explanatory structure of the social world. However, the hallmark of substantive questions in the sense of Sider is that normative evaluations “should not intrude into an objective description of reality” because answers are independent of “the theorist’s point of view” (2016, 13). Given such an account of substantivity, there is a steep price for treating questions about the boundaries of race as metaphysical: answers cannot be influenced by our normative concerns about the boundaries of race as the requirement for substantive metaphysics is stance-independent objectivity. The only way of recognizing the deeply political character of negotiations of the boundaries of race seems to be to reject their status as substantive metaphysical debates.

In a previous article (Ludwig, 2015), I relied on Sider’s notion of substantivity to encourage philosophers to reject the “new metaphysics of race” as misguiding philosophical reasoning about the normative and pragmatic dimensions of racial classification. Rather than treating questions about the nature of race as either value-free or non-substantive, it seemed (and to some degree: still seems) to me that philosophers will create more substantial insights by grounding their discussions of race in different intellectual traditions.

Problems with “fundamentality” and “substantivity” illustrate the worry that the tools of analytic metaphysics may not be adequate for philosophical discussions of race and of the social domain more generally. At the same time, these problems have led to critically self-reflective proposals of how to reform metaphysical inquiry for the social domain. Even if there are problems, much of the recent literature (Barnes, 2014; Diaz-Leon, 2020; Hochman, 2017; Mikkola, 2016) seems to agree that we should not overreact with iconoclastic anti-metaphysical or anti-analytic conclusions but rather contribute to nuanced reform that can guide productive metaphysical inquiry into the nature of race.

With regard to fundamentality, Barnes (2014) does not conclude that the shortcomings of fundamentality-based accounts should lead to a general rejection of metaphysics but rather that we have to develop a robust metaphysics “beyond the fundamental”. With regard to my (Ludwig, 2015) worries about the exclusion of normative concerns, Hochman (2017) has argued that metaphysical debates about race rarely confirm to Sider’s ideal of stance-independence: “Most of the work done by metaphysicians of race is pluralist, much is normative—even explicitly political” (2017, 2710). According to Hochman, the problem is therefore not metaphysics of race but rather an overly narrow operationalization of what counts as metaphysics. This emerging literature on the meta-metaphysics of the social domain therefore seems to converge on a case for careful reform rather than a general rejection of analytic metaphysics of race.

**4. The Hypothesis of Systemic Misalignment**

The last section sketched two problems with two core concepts - fundamentality and substantivity - from analytic metaphysics and a reformist response that tries to calibrate metaphysical tools for more adequate application in the social domain. In contrast to such a measured case for careful reform, this section explores the more radical claim that the tools of analytic metaphysics are fundamentally inadequate for debates about race.

To motivate such a pessimistic diagnosis, consider other scientific cases that involve the transfer of intellectual toolsfrom one domain of inquiry into another. For example, consider the case of econophysics as an example from recent scientific practice. By applying intellectual tools from statistical physics to economics, econophysics provides new tools for modelling issues such as economic inequality but also commonly raises concerns about misrepresentation. Rather than fully embracing or rejecting the transfer of intellectual tools from statistical physics to economics, Thebault, Bradley, and Reutlinger (2018) develop a conciliatory interpretation that is reflective about its prospects and limitations. Such a conciliatory reform leaves room for a more nuanced response that involves mixed strategies of abandonment, modification, and preservation of intellectual tools.

Even if such a conciliatory strategy is appropriate in the case of econophysics, there are also cases where it is more appropriate to abandon the project of transferring tools between domains of inquiry. Think of a field such as sociobiology that still has a committed community of proponents but has also been widely criticized as distorting both academic and public understanding of social behavior. While classics like Gould and Lewontin (1979) or Kitcher (1989) do not deny the relevance of evolutionary factors in shaping social behavior, they argue that sociobiology creates a wide range of misunderstandings from overreliance on adaptationist models, neglect of social environments, unsupported adaptationist speculation, public misunderstandings of human behavior, and so on. In contrast to a simple misalignment that can be fixed through conciliatory reform, these critics defend a hypothesis of *systemic misalignment* that makes the toolbox of sociobiology structurally inadequate and suggests that social behavior is more adequately understood through different research programs that employ different concepts, models, and methods.

A common symptom of systemic rather than simple misalignment is problem accumulation. Simple misalignments can lead to deep misunderstandings but can also be addressed by identifying individual causes. In this sense, problems with fundamentality and substantivity from the last section may turn out to be cases of simple misalignment. In contrast, the main symptom of systemic misalignment is problem accumulation. Problem accumulation cannot be easily addressed because problems resurface in new and unexpected areas. This section provides evidence for problem accumulation in the context of analytic metaphysics of race through seven examples of more specific misalignment. The argument of this section does not require agreement on each of the diagnosed problems and the list of problems could also be further extended. The point is not to develop a comprehensive list of problems but rather sufficiently diverse evidence to motivate concerns about systemic misalignment.

*Challenge 3: Conceptual analysis reinforces geographic provincialism*

Conceptual analysis is a defining method of analytic philosophy that has been widely discussed in the context of debates about gender and race (Diaz-Leon, 2018; Mikkola, 2009; Glasgow, 2010). For example, *race* is a concept with a wide range of potential referents including biologically defined populations, social groups, and false racialist ideas. In order to figure out which of these potential referents is picked out by the ordinary concept of race, it seems necessary to analyze carefully how the concept is actually structured. And indeed, conceptual analysis has played an important role in competing accounts of race such as Glasgow’s (2010) anti-realism and Hardimon’s (2017) realism.

One important commonality of such competing analyses of the concept *race* is that they are focused on English discourse without much attention to how concepts of race are shaped beyond the Anglophone world. While there is nothing wrong with an analysis of *race* in English, it is concerning that metaphysics of race is often exclusively concerned with English simply because most prominent analytic philosophers are trained in this language. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Ludwig 2018), the dominance of English runs the risk of making metaphysics of race irrelevant for the majority of the world’s racialized people and for many of the most pressing concerns about racialization from Indigenous people in Latin America to Black Africans in Darfur to South Asians in Qatar to Jews in France to Syrian refugees in Germany to Uyghurs in China to Rohingya in Myanmar to Papuans in Indonesia, etc. As a result, conceptual analysis has contributed to a provincial metaphysical debate that pays almost no attention to racial phenomena on a global scale. For example, there could hardly be a stronger contrast between the geographic provincialism of current state-of-the-art introductions to the metaphysics of race (Glasgow et al., 2019; cf. Ludwig, 2020a) and the quickly growing body of anthropological and sociological literature that focuses on cross-cultural relations between racial discourses and practices (see Bonnett, 2018; Dikötter, 2015).

The mismatch between the increasingly global orientation of interdisciplinary debates about race and the narrow focus on conceptual analysis of “race” in English in mainstream philosophy[[1]](#footnote-1) provides a straightforward illustration of the risk of misalignment through established tools in analytic metaphysics. There may be comparably little cost in restricting conceptual analysis to English if the discussion is focussed on issues such as the existence of tables and composed objects in general. After all, a metaphysician may argue that the underlying questions of composition are quite independent from what counts as a table in Darfur or Myanmar or Qatar. By addressing deeply contested and culturally variable social concepts like *race,* however, standard procedures of conceptual analysis in English run the risk of marginalizing engagement with the “rest of the world”.

*Challenge 4: Theories of reference are descriptively and politically inadequate*

Metaphysics of race often builds on a broader metaphysical debate about internalist and externalist theories of reference. Much of this debate has been developed by focusing on presumed natural kinds such as water or elm trees (Putnam, 1973) that are not socially contested and do not raise immediate societal concerns. For example, is the referent of *water* determined by widely recognized macro-properties such as being an odorless and transparent liquid so that something other than H2O could also qualify as water? Is the referent of *elm tree* determined by experts in phytology given that ordinary speakers in modern societies are often not capable of distinguishing elm trees from other taxa?

Addressing the nature of race on the basis of these debates about reference, however, comes with risks of misconstruing the dynamics of ontological negotiation in the social sphere. When discussing the nature of water, there is little room for political concerns about the conceptual role of *water* or even the chemical structure of the referent H2O. In contrast, both the conceptual roles of *race* and material racialized structures are deeply political and variable across cultural and historical contexts. Determining the nature of race by mapping currently dominant concepts on dominant social structures runs the risk of being both descriptively and politically inadequate. First, there is a risk of reifying a spatially and temporally restricted snapshot of dynamic racial discourses and practices by trying to answer questions about the nature of race through current racial concepts and structures. Second, there is a risk of reproducing unjust dominant racial discourses and practices as answers to questions about the nature of race.

For example, consider debates about the boundaries of whiteness in the United States. Are Arab Americans white? A metaphysician who relies on categories of the US census (e.g. Spencer, 2015) may insist that Arab Americans are indeed white while a metaphysician who focuses on social practices subordination and privilege (e.g. Haslanger, 2012) may conclude that Arab Americans are not white. However, it is far from clear that such a debate about the implications of competing accounts of reference is helpful for understanding racial discourses and practices in the United States. For both social scientists and social activists who are engaging with ambiguous and dynamically shifting racial positions of Arab Americans, generalized (affirmative or negative) claims about whiteness seem to miss the complexity of actual racial practices. Rather than finding the correct theory of reference that clearly demarcates the extension of whiteness, engagement with the social reality of Arab American seems to require a perspective that provides resources for theorizing ambiguities and shifting dynamics of racial identification that can position them on either side of the Du Bois’ “color line”.

In addition to these questions of representational adequacy, theories of reference also run the risk of misconstruing the politics of racial categories. Consider the US Census as an illustration of the complex mix of descriptive and aspirational uses of racial categories. For example, increasing self-identification as Native American and of White Hispanic in the US Census reflects not only descriptive assumptions about how people see themselves positioned in society but also aspirational assumptions about how people want to see themselves positioned (Gullickson and Morning, 2011). Standard theories of reference leave little room for “aspirational metaphysics” as they focus on how concepts are currently used and what structures they currently refer to. In the case of *water,* this seems of little concern as there are no pressing questions about how *water* may be used differently and what kinds of social implications such uses may have. In the case of racial categories, however, descriptive and aspirational uses often blend and standard theories of reference therefore run the risk of simply reinforcing dominant conceptual practices in their answers to questions about the nature of race.

*Challenge 5: Demands for conceptual clarity obscure conceptual complexity*

Analytic philosophy is often driven by a demand for clarity that also translates into a demand for clear definitions with necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Many debates in analytic metaphysics of race reflect this ambition by aiming to isolate certain features such as biological, cultural, or social properties as the “the logical core” (Hardimon 2017, 28) of race. However, it is far from clear that the identification of a “logical core” and formulation of non-ambiguous definitions are adequate for analyzing messy discourses and practices surrounding race.

In fact, the idea of a master narrative with a non-ambiguous definition may itself be part of the problem. As McPherson (2015, 676) puts it: “‘race’ talk overall is too ambiguous and contested to be salvaged in the search for a dominant understanding—largely because of uncertainty about what race is supposed to be in the first place. [...] If so much philosophical work has to go into pinning down a master meaning of ‘race’, we have reason to suspect that something strange is going on. We can break the cycle of murky disputes over whether there are races in some sense or other” (see also Ludwig 2015, Spencer 2019 for related points). The problem becomes even more pressing when *race* is taken into a global context to respond to the challenge 3 as it is very doubtful that there is a stable conceptual core that unifies concepts of race on a global scale (Ludwig 2018, 2020a). Again, one may conclude that intellectual standards of analytic metaphysics are simply not well-suited to guide debates about race that have to navigate messy discourses and practices that change along historical and geographic dimensions. Furthermore, one may appeal to methods such as ethnographic description or discourse analysis that are widely employed for understanding these ambiguities and complexities in intellectual traditions beyond analytic philosophy.

*Challenge 6: General metaphysical positions are uninformative about specifics of race*

Metaphysicians often make claims about specific entities such as elm trees, tables, or water that are derived from more general metaphysical positions regarding composition, theories of reference, ontological realism, and so on. This dependency on general metaphysical positions is also common in debates about race. For example, theories of reference play a prominent role in debates between realists and anti-realists about race. Anti-realists have often been criticized for relying on inadequate descriptivist theories of reference that falsely put “folk theories” at the centre of debates about the referent of *race* (e.g. Haslanger 2012, 432). To provide another example of dependency of general metaphysical positions, consider Glasgow and Woodward’s (2015) “basic racial realism”. Glasgow and Woodward start by arguing for basic realism “as a piece of general metaphysics” that includes not only natural kinds but also much more loosely unified kinds such as *things around the tree.* Given such a permissive realist metaphysics, it is indeed straightforward that races also exist just like countless other entities that feature in everyday ontologies but are not sufficiently unified to be topics of scientific inquiry.

Deriving claims about the existence and nature of race from such general metaphysical positions can raise the concern that they ultimately say more about theoretical background assumptions of philosophers than about specific issues in the social domain. For example, Glasgow and Woodward’s ontological permissivism may indeed imply that races exist just like things around the treebut this also does not really tell us more about races than about things around the tree. It is therefore not immediately clear that a defense of the existence of races on the basis of basic realism is more informative than a defense of the non-existence of races on the basis of some other “piece of general metaphysics” such as mereological nihilism which rejects the existence of all composed objects from tables to races. In both cases, it seems that the claims do not tell us anything specifically about race as they are entirely derived from general metaphysical positions. After all, *rac*ecould be simply replaced with *table, things around the tree*,or whatever other random entity.

This disconnect between general metaphysical positions and understanding of specific phenomena may not be much of a problem in metaphysical debates about composed objects. When mereological nihilists claim that tables do not really exist, they do not aim to advance understanding of tables in real life contexts. Tables just happen to be convenient examples but could be substituted with other random entities such as chairs, screwdrivers, or piñatas. In the context of the metaphysics of race, however, such a disconnect reinforces the worry that philosophers have ultimately very little to say about race that would be relevant for researchers in other fields or even social activists who are challenging racial realities in practices. If metaphysicians of race want to contribute beyond their niche of research, they have to show that their uses of general metaphysical principles (e.g. “ontological permissivism → races exist”) are different from the traditional cases in metaphysics (e.g. “mereological nihilism → tables do not exist”) that do not advance understanding of specific entities.

*Challenge 7: Metaphysical debates can depoliticize philosophy of race*

While it is possible to formulate more specific concerns about the tools of analytic metaphysics, many of them relate to an underlying worry about the politics of philosophical reasoning about race. The intellectual and political biographies of authors such as Du Bois, Cooper, and Fanon illustrate how theorizing race has been historically deeply entangled with political struggles and activism. Skepticism towards mainstreaming of race in academic philosophy (e.g. Botts, 2018; Curry, 2009, 2011) often reflects the suspicion that the current literature fails to continue or even actively undermines this entanglement of scholarly and activist work by producing rather depoliticized discourses about the nature of racial phenomena.

The more specific problems (1)-(6) can provide illustrations of this worry: a focus on the fundamental can push race to the “merely applied” periphery of philosophical debates *(challenge 1)*, emphasis on substantivity can neglect the normative dimensions of negotiating race *(challenge 2)*, conceptual analysis can contribute to a neglect social realities beyond the Anglophone world *(challenge 3)*, theories of reference do not reflect on aspirational uses of racial categories *(challenge 4)*, an overemphasis on clarity can obscure the ambiguities and complexities surrounding race (*challenge 5*), and general metaphysical principles will often be uninformative about social structures that matter for social activism *(challenge 6)*.

While it is possible to articulate such more specific concerns, an underlying worry is that debates in analytic metaphysics can obscure political and activist projects that put academic research more directly and more successfully in the service of social change. While critical race theorists have captured the imagination of generations of activists in shaping political responses to social injustices, analytic metaphysics seems to get stuck with abstract positions that remain too detached from practice to guide policy and too esoteric to capture public imagination. Rather than bolstering the emancipatory and radical legacy of critical race theory, mainstreamed metaphysics of race therefore runs the risk of excluding or at least taming this legacy in philosophical debates.

**5. Critical Metaphysics of Race**

The previous sections introduced seven concerns about transferring tools from analytic metaphysics into the social domain to make a case for problem accumulation as a symptom of systemic misalignment. The tools of analytic metaphysics have been shaped for the purposes of discussing entities such as natural kinds and abstract objects that differ from entities in the social domain and run the risk of limiting or even misleading philosophical understanding of race.

One may respond that the claims of systemic misalignment are overly dramatic. Of course, the extension of analytic metaphysics into the social domain comes with methodological challenges but many contemporary metaphysicians are willing to make substantial revisions and to expand their intellectual horizon when engaging with the social domain. As pointed out earlier, criticism of “fundamentality” and “substantivity” has come from within analytic metaphysics and led to productive suggestions for moving social metaphysics “beyond the fundamental” (Barnes 2014) by embracing normative and explicitly political considerations (Diaz-Leon, 2020; Hochman, 2017; Mikkola, 2016,). Similar responses seem possible regarding the remaining challenges (3)-(7) as many philosophers (including my own Ludwig 2018, 2020b) mobilize resources from the analytic tradition to theorize race in globally reflexive and explicitly political terms. So, why the dramatic claim of systemic misalignment rather than careful reform of available intellectual tools?

To be sure, I do not want to suggest that tools from analytic metaphysics or even analytic philosophy more generally always mislead reasoning about race. There are plenty of inspiring examples of the use of tools from analytic philosophy for critical engagement with race from political philosophy (e.g. Mills 1998, Corlett 2003) to philosophy of science (e.g. Winther and Kaplan, 2013; Msimang, 2018). However, the problem of systemic misalignment provides an opportunity for reflecting about the field of metaphysics of race as a whole and its overall low level of integration with the interface of academia and society – from public policy to social activism. Why are researchers in diverse fields from biomedical sciences to decolonial studies rarely engaging with the carefully articulated metaphysical positions in the philosophical literature? Why is the interface of academia and society so far detached from metaphysical debates in academic philosophy that public discourse remains largely unaffected by our debates about the existence and nature of race?

Methodologically, these questions motivate an explicit program of critical metaphysics of race rather than a mostly reactive tinkering with established tools to avoid problems such as (1)-(7). Insofar as there is a problem of systemic misalignment, critical metaphysics of race should aim for a systemic response. Situating these issues in the wider methodological literature on action research provides resources for substantial reconsideration of how to align metaphysical research with its wider empirical and societal significance.

Action research has a long tradition as a methodology in the social sciences (Lewin, 1946; Kemmis et al., 2013) that embraces the entanglement of conducting research and intervening in society. Methodologically, action research contrasts with linear models of the relationship between research and society that consider science to be detached from practical and societal concerns but providing an objective knowledge base from which applications of societal relevance are derived. Linear models of the relation between research and society are often illustrated with examples of basic science and their long-term significance for developing application from better technologies to better policies. While action research does not deny that socially disinterested basic research can lead to applications of societal relevance, it emphasizes that such a linear relation between an objective knowledge base and societal application misrepresents most research in social domains. For example, social sciences do not uncover general laws of how society works from which societal or even anti-racist interventions derive. Action research therefore advocates a methodology that addresses epistemic and societal goals as co-constructed in research process. Rather than assuming that societal issues become relevant only at the output side of applications, they are considered a crucial part in formulating research problems, operationalizing research questions, selecting methods and data sets, negotiating theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and so on.

Action research methodologies provide a productive challenge for social metaphysics as they contrast sharply with traditional ways of conceiving the methodology of metaphysical research. Indeed, much of traditional metaphysics does not promise societal impact at all - e.g. debates about the very existence of abstract or composed objects are not justified by suggesting societal interventions but rather answering basic intellectual questions about the structure of reality. And even if potential societal impact is endorsed, traditional metaphysical methods suggest a more linear model in which metaphysics functions as basic research addressing fundamental questions about the structure of the social realm (e.g. about the nature and reality of races) and then potentially leading to useful interventions “further down the road” in the applying these fundamental insights.

Framing metaphysics of race as action research provides a different angle for thinking about the relation between societal concerns and social metaphysics by aiming to align them along the entire research process from selecting target phenomena for metaphysical inquiry to negotiating their relevance in public discourse. An action research methodology therefore promises a systemic response to the challenges of this article. For example, some of the challenges of misalignment concern the choice of target phenomena as philosophers often restrict their analysis of racial structures in the US (challenge 3). Other challenges relate to the questions that are asked about target phenomena – for example is philosophical engagement with *race* about identifying a “logical core” or about understanding conceptual complexity in social practice (challenge 5). Other challenges relate to the choice of method when addressing socially negotiated questions about socially negotiated target phenomena (e.g. challenge 4 and 6).

Conceptualizing metaphysics of race as action research provides a methodological angle that departs substantially from how analytic metaphysics has been traditionally conceived. That is not to say that it is incompatible with all developments in social metaphysics. For example, there has been increasing focus on non-epistemic values in metaphysical debates (Brigandt and Rosario, 2020; Diaz-Leon, 2020; Ludwig, 2016; Haslanger, 2016) that challenges a sharp division between purely objective research and social application. At the same time, action research goes beyond the well-established criticism of value-free science (Douglas, 2009; Elliott, 2017). While the latter tend to focus on the more specific issue of the legitimacy of non-epistemic values in choosing between scientific theories (or metaphysical positions), action research aims to provide a broader methodological framework of aligning research programs and societal goals in research practices.

One core feature of such an alignment process is a reconfiguration of the relation between metaphysics and interdisciplinary research. Analytic metaphysics certainly provides some tools that are helpful for engaging with questions about the nature of race but it is far from the only relevant intellectual tradition. First, race is a cross-culturally, disciplinarily, and historically unstable entity. Both the concept *race* and material racial structures are too flexible to be fixed through any approach that is not deeply engaged with the specifics of its context. Whether it is a sociologist of science who addresses forms of racialization in pharmaceutical research (Kahn, 2012), an anthropologist who addresses the structure of racial discourses in Colombia (Wade, 1995), or a historian who focuses on the formation of racial categories and practices medieval Spain (Nirenberg, 2009) – contextually meaningful accounts of the nature of race need to engage substantially with the contextual complexity of racial constellations. Second, the politics of racial ontologies is an equally complex empirical issue affecting a wide range of issues such as public policy (Ludwig, 2020b), education (Donovan, 2016), epidemiology (Lorusso and Bacchini, 2015), or genomics (Winther, 2014). Insofar as metaphysics of race embraces action research, it requires empirical nuance not only for the purposes of greater descriptive accuracy but also for navigating the complex normative ramifications of navigating human diversity with racial concepts.

Framing metaphysics of race as interdisciplinary action research provides resources for critically situating metaphysical tools beyond the challenge of systemic misalignment. Indeed, metaphysical tools can help to clarify conceptual and material processes of racialization. However, situating these tools into empirical and social practices requires critical reflexivity beyond isolated responses to individual symptoms of misalignment. While metaphysicians of race are increasingly engaging with the normative foundations of their research and embracing interdisciplinary engagement, the relative isolation of the field as a whole reflects that there is still a long way to go in establishing critical metaphysics of race as a practice that is fully engaged with empirical and political negotiations of racial realities.

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1. While the status of conceptual analysis is controversial in meta-metaphysical debates, the problem of geographic provincialism also affects common alternatives. For example, Haslanger (2019) replaces traditional conceptual analysis with a methodology of analyzing broader “representational traditions”. However, Haslanger’s analysis of “our representational tradition” (2019, 16) again remains restricted to the United States “for the purposes of our discussion”. No matter whether approached through traditional conceptual analysis or alternatives such as “representational traditions”, a response to the problem of geographic provincialism would require a serious expansion of evidence beyond common practices in analytic metaphysics. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)